

Valley mills linked to slavery

By Donna Boynton CORRESPONDENT

NORTHBRIDGE— The Blackstone Valley is known as the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution. However, it is also linked to another important aspect of American history — slavery.

The economic ties the Blackstone Valley had to slavery were discussed Saturday night during “Traces of the Trade: Massachusetts and the Economy of Slavery,” presented by Mass Humanities at Alternatives Unlimited. The presentation was one of six scheduled throughout Massachusetts.

“Many objects manufactured in the North were used on plantations in the South,” said Pleun Bouricius, program officer with Mass Humanities.

“We’ve come a long way, and for many years, we didn’t recognize the connection,” said Chuck Arning, a park ranger with John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor for the National Parks Service.

The program included a tour and history of the The Red Brick Mill and the mills in the Whitinsville area; a documentary by Katrina Browne, and a discussion led by Brown University historian Seth Rockman.

The documentary followed a family as they discover their ancestor — Mark Anthony DeWolfe — ran the largest slave trade operation in the world from his home in Bristol, R.I. DeWolfe brought several hundred thousand Africans in chains from Ghana, and traded for sugar to make rum.

The film follows a group of family members as they trace the slaves’ route — from leaving Ghana to Cuba and then back to Bristol. — while they, too, try to come to terms with the role their predecessor played in slavery.

Locally, the connection may not be as direct, but there is a connection nonetheless. Tools and machines that were manufactured in the Blackstone Valley, particularly in Whitinsville, were sold to southern plantation owners.

A smithy and foundry were built upon the Mumford River, which was used to power the operations, said Mr. Arning.

Paul Whitin came to what was then South Northbridge from Dedham to apprentice at the foundry. He and James Fletcher grew their business along the Mumford River, making scythes, hoes and shovels, which were sold to plantation owners in the South, said Mr. Arning.

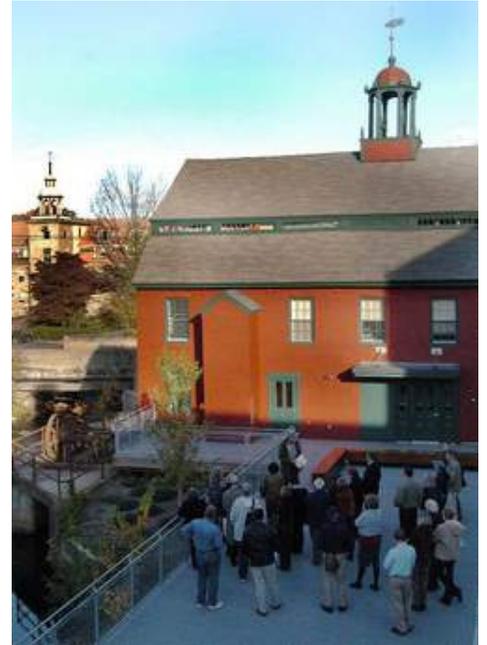
When the Embargo Act of 1807 prevented trade with England during the Napoleonic War, the American textile industry burned with “cotton fever,” and the Whitin Mill spun cotton sent up from the South, said Mr. Arning. The Red Brick Mill was built in 1826.

The mill received the cotton in bales from southern cotton gins. Then, workers would cull the cotton bales, removing impurities such as seeds. To do so, they employed a picker, a machine patented by John Whitin, Paul Whitin’s son, he said.

John Whitin’s picker became a popular tool, spreading by word of mouth until it became a booming business. John Whitin built a second mill across the street from The Red Brick Mill solely to produce the machine, which was used on southern cotton plantations. The question is did they know what they were making and where it was going to be used?, he asked.

Mr. Rockman, the historian, asked participants if it was fair to link the Whitin Family with the DeWolfe Family, which had such direct ties to slavery.

“I don’t think it is excusable, but I think there is a difference between going over and collecting slaves, and being a passive participant,” said Ellen Onorato of Grafton, who attended the event. “It’s not excusable, but it is a different level of participation.”



Visitors tour the restored Whitinsville mill complex Saturday as part of the program on the slave trade. (RICH DUGAS)